Gay, lesbian politicians are learning the basics

By KYLE HENLEY
THE GAZETTE

Gay candidates feel they have a better chance of getting elected now even though voters seem to reject gay issues, such as same-sex marriage.

They point to recent victories in Idaho, Texas, Missouri and North Carolina — states not known for being gay friendly — as signs that gays can prevail at the polls in Anytown, U.S.A.

Those campaign victories came at the same time that 11 states approved bans on same-sex marriage.

While Americans may not be comfortable with Mr. and Mr. Smith as neighbors, the individual election victories mean "Americans across the country are open to openly gay representation," said Robin Brand, vice president of campaigns and elections for the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund and Leadership Institute.

Fresh off the November wins, 39 gay and lesbian political hopefuls from across the country — both Democrat and Republican — are meeting in Colorado Springs this weekend to learn how to run successful campaigns for city council, state legislature or Congress.

The gay politicians are part of an intensive training course put on by the Washington, D.C.-based fund. Most of the sessions have been closed to the public.

"You have more gays and lesbians who want to be part of the process, who want to get involved," Brand said. "We have a great program that is well-produced. It really is a great starting point for anyone running for office."

The four-day seminar began Thursday night at Gil Foundation headquarters in Colorado Springs, with participants putting in days that start at 8 a.m. and finish late at night.

The seminar is covering campaign basics such as fundraising, knocking on doors, staffing and speech writing.

"I've never run for office before," said Jose Cisneros, 49, a trainee who was recently appointed treasurer of San Francisco.

Cisneros must stand for election in November to keep the job.

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"I'm looking for essentially a crash course in how to be a good candidate and how to run a successful campaign," he said. "I think a lot of the nuts and bolts are the same, but running a campaign as openly gay, there is a kind of a consistent level of things that are different."

State Sen. Jennifer Veiga, D-Denver, knows those ropes. She's the first openly gay legislator in the Colorado General Assembly.

When she was first elected to the Colorado House in 1996, Veiga kept her sexual orientation a secret. It never came up as a campaign issue.

Later, though, the former House minority leader went public about it.

Veiga, who addressed the trainees this week, said her first campaign as an openly lesbian candidate in 2002 was a dramatic departure from previous efforts.

"Every piece my opponent sent out had something to do with the fact I was gay," she said. "It was hard not to get upset. You just wanted to scream out and respond.

"It took some calming influences to convince me it wasn't a big deal and (to) remind me to just keep talking about the issues."

Veiga's message to the group is to be candid about sexual orientation but don't make it a big part of the campaign.

"I think when you are running a campaign, your sexual orientation isn't an issue," she said. "People want to know what you are doing about the rising cost of health care or how you are going to relieve congestion on the roads. Being gay doesn't have anything to do with it."

Most agree that the importance of a candidate's sexual orientation on whether he or she will be successful is based on where the race is held.

In Colorado, for instance, a gay candidate such as Veiga can do well in Denver's Washington Park neighborhood area.

In socially conservative Colorado Springs, where the City Council has voted against providing health care benefits to the same-sex partner of city employees, being openly gay could be expected to more of a political liability.

"I'm very mindful of the mindset of voters throughout this state," said Daniel Merritt-LeSatz, 30, a trainee from Denver and head of the Colorado Log Cabin Republicans, a group of 30-40 gay GOPers.

Merritt-LeSatz has worked on campaigns for Gov. Bill Owens and former Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell.

He's taking the Victory Fund training to hone his skills, perhaps to run another person's campaign some day, or may be to run himself.

"I know the basics that go into running a campaign," he said. "But from what I understand this is very intensive training. I don't think there is anything I'll learn that won't be beneficial."

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